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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the growing trend toward businesses in United States becoming multinational corporations, particularly in the Latin American countries. Specific attention is given to the skills needed by the organizational communicator in order to function in those settings. The paper presents a cross-cultural business simulation designed to teach relevant communication skills and to develop cultural sensitivity. The paper concludes with a discussion of ways in which corporations, universities, and colleges might integrate the simulation experience into their training programs and curricula. (FL)

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DEVELOPING CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH BUSINESS COMMUNICATION SIMULATION

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DEVELOPING CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH BUSINESS COMMUNICATION SIMULATION

As American firms attempt to increase their markets abroad, there has developed a great interest in cross-cultural communication. Companies are beginning to see the need for improved efforts in preparing and training their personnel to function effectively in different cultures.

This paper discusses the growing trend toward multinational corporations, particularly in the Latin American countries. Specific attention is given to the skills needed by the organizational communicator in order to function effectively in these settings. The authors present a cross-cultural business simulation designed to teach relevant communication skills. Central to the authors' perspective is the need for skill development in the area of "cultural sensitivity." The authors discuss ways in which cultural sensitivity is developed through the simulation experience. The paper concludes by discussing ways in which corporations, universities and colleges might integrate such an approach into current training and curriculums.

International Business

During the past three decades multinational corporations (MNCs) have increased in size and number in various parts of the world. "Sales abroad by U.S. firms from exports and direct investment in 1978 were $485 billion plus, compared to about $33 billion from both sources just 25 years earlier." (Cateora and Hess, 1979, p. 4.) Numerous major corporations including I.B.M., Pfizer, Gillette, Hoover, Coca-Cola, Ferro, International Systems and Controls, Sirco, J. W. Thompson and F. W. Woolworth, receive over half their earnings

from foreign operations (Loudon and Della Bitta, 1979, p. 135; Cateora and Hess, 1979, p. 6.) However, this apparent success of international operations is frequently blemished by ethnocentric behavior of corporate representatives visiting host countries (Hall, 1959).

Interpersonal transactions that are taken for granted in one country face varying degrees of probability of achieving desirable results in another country. For example, if a Saudi-Arabian host offers an American visitor a cup of coffee or tea, the American stands a better chance of preserving friendly relations if he accepts the Saudi's offer. Politely refusing a cup of coffee may be acceptable behavior in the U.S., but to a Saudi, it may be an insult, as the offer of a cup of coffee is an expression of Saudi hospitality and a symbol of one's honor (Almaney, 1974, p. 26). An American visiting Latin America may arrive at a Latin executive's office for a 10:00 a.m. appointment at 9:55 a.m.; however, the Latin may not appear until 11:00 a.m. While the American may be fuming at having to wait over an hour, the Latin may feel no need to apologize to the American as this is normal practice in the Latin American business environment (Hall, 1959). Through enculturation individuals from different cultures learn to perceive the same events differently.

As the growth of international markets expands, there is an increasing need to provide business persons with the appropriate skills and training necessary to deal with these cultural differences.

Most training programs designed to prepare business persons to function effectively in a new culture are highly inadequate. According to one survey, 35 percent of the companies which send personnel abroad provide training on an occasional basis and 35 percent provide no training at all (Bennett and Desatnick, 1978).

The training that is provided often emphasizes mastery of the language with little or no emphasis on the cultural norms relevant to transacting

business. Most companies hope that through frequent business trips and language proficiency, business persons will function effectively in the new culture.

Business persons attempting to adjust to a new culture are often very frustrated by their lack of adequate preparation. Even though they may use the language well, this doesn't seem to be enough to prepare them to transact business effectively in the new culture. A sensitivity to cultural norms and expectations is needed if the business person is going to be able to make the appropriate adaptations necessary to transact business effectively.

The business communication simulation that follows offers an exciting approach for teaching cross-cultural communication skills to business persons. It is designed to develop increased cultural sensitivity and awareness by placing participants in an actual business setting. The simulation process described below is one used in a marketing/consumer behavior course at San Jose State University.

Simulating Cross-Cultural Sensitivity (copyright, 1980, Jim Stull)

Basic to understanding the theoretical foundations of the simulation is an awareness of the components of a culture which comprise the international business environment (Stull and Baird, 1980a). Before getting into the actual simulation, students are provided with a conceptual model which views the cultural environment of international business across eight areas: language, religion, attitudes and values, education, social organization, technology, law and politics (Terpstra, 1978). Once the students understand the conceptual framework within which the simulation fits, groups are formed and the process begins.

The simulation is designed for a 15-week, two 75 minute periods per week consumer behavior course, with approximately forty students per section; adaptations for course length and size are encouraged. Before commencing with

the simulation, naturally an explanation to the students is necessary to show them how the simulation fits into the objectives of the course. For consumer behavior, for example, all of these cultural components affect consumer choice.

Week 1: Assign students to research groups, one group for each cultural component (language, attitudes and values, religion, social organization, education, technology, politics and law); five students per group. Provide the group with bibliographies, if available.

Language: Assign literature on intercultural communication; ask for focus on verbal and nonverbal messages that are unique to various cultures.

Attitudes and values: Assign literature on attitudes; ask for focus on different cultures' attitudes toward time, space, work and achievement, wealth and material gain, and change.

Religion: Assign literature on religion; ask for focus on animism, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism.

Social Organization: Assign literature on social organization; ask for focus on male-female, supervisor-subordinate, labor-union, family and friendship relationships, social class, and reference groups.

Education: Assign literatue on education; ask for focus on education in low, moderate and high development areas; also focus on formal and informal education, trade, technical and higher education.

Technology: Assign literature on technology; ask for focus on technology in low, moderate and high development areas; also focus on agricultural, industrial and highly technological areas.

Politics: Assign literature on politics; ask for focus on various idologies, including democracy, republic, capitalism, socialism, communism, nationalsim, imperialsim, and colonialism.

Law: Assign literature on law; ask for focus on various legal systems, including civil law, common law, communist law, Muslim law, and indigenous legal systems.

Weeks 1-5: Pace student research group through their research procedures, keeping them aware that they will be presenting their findings to the class during weeks six through nine. Provide sufficient in-class time for brainstorming, problem-solving and question-feedback sessions. These first five weeks may also be spent covering or highlighting portions of textbook not highlighted in simulation.

Weeks 6-9: Groups present their findings; for current simulation, one topic area (variable or component) is presented each class period for eight successive meetings. Students should be encouraged to take notes because the information will be used during the third module of the simulation.

Weeks 10-15: During week ten, form new groups; assign one member from each of the research groups to the new groups so that each new group has one specialist from each research group. These new groups should have eight members. Each group is a business organization representing a separate, unique culture. Pass out a handout similar to Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1
CULTURAL VARIABLES

Variables	Culture				
	BWANA	FELIZ	LEUNG	KORAN	DHARMA
Language	Swahili	Spanish	Cantonese	Arabic	Hindi
Religion(Major)	Animistic	Catholicism	Buddhism	Muslim	Hindu
Education	Informal	Secondary (urban only)	Formal Tech/Trade	The Koran	Formal/ Developing
Technology	Low/Developing	Moderate/ Developing	Low-Moderate Developing	Low	Agricultural Low/Developing
Politics	Republic	Republic/ Unstable	Communist Nationalist	Muslim	Socialist/ British Colony
Legal System	Indigenous	Civil	Communist/ Common	Muslim	Common
Attitudes	(to find)*				
Social Org	(to find)*				

*Attitudes find out general attitudes toward time, space, work, achievement, wealth, material gain, change, etc.

*Social Org: find out general role relationships in families, friendships, male-female roles, superior-subordinate roles, union-labor roles, reference groups, social classes, etc.

Procedure:

1. Have each culture consult its specialists to develop a clear understanding of their own identity regarding each variable or component. Focus specifically on developing verbal and nonverbal language norms, attitudes and social organization norms which will be observed during negotiations with other cultures. This may take a few days.

2. Instruct cultures that their overall goal is to market a product (or product line), service or idea to each other culture, and that success depends upon how well they know their own culture as well as the target cultures.

Procedure:

3. Have cultures develop a product, service or idea which they feel is compatible with their culture and which feel that they can successfully market to each other culture. This does not have to be an invention, merely an innovation for the new market.

4. Have cultures develop a marketing strategy for each other target culture, being sensitive to the idiosyncracies of each culture.

5. Have cultures arrange to negotiate with each other culture. This may be done orally or in writing.

6. Have the cultures negotiate with each other, persisting until a contract has been settled or until a perceived stalemate has been reached.

7. Discuss the simulation, focusing on cultural sensitivity felt by participants.

Each step may take a few class periods, especially those involving cultural self-identity and other-identity. Depending upon the population of the course, various levels of marketing and advertising activity may be reached by students.

Skill Development

The use of business communication simulation is most effective in developing skill in cultural sensitivity. As has already been pointed out, such a skill is critical in transacting business successfully. Exhibit 2 conceptualizes the way in which the simulation develops skill in cultural sensitivity.

Exhibit 2
DEVELOPING CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Week 1-9 Research Presentations on Cultural Components

Week 10-15 Formulation of Business Organizations

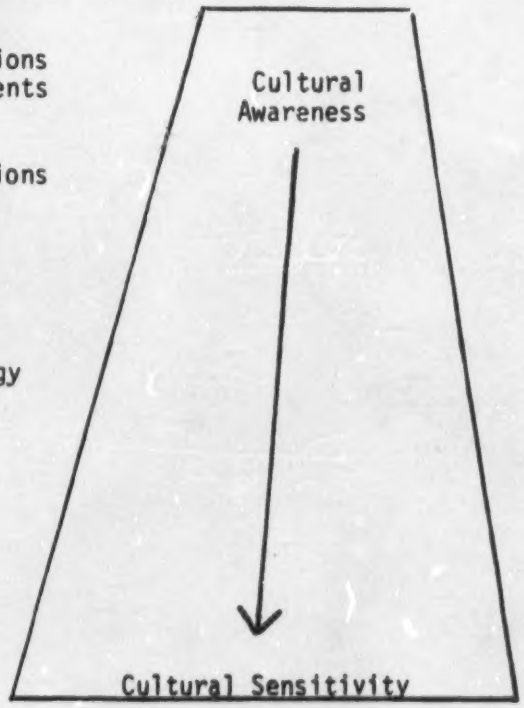
.cultural identity

.develop goal, product, service, idea, etc.

.develop marketing strategy

.negotiate with cultures for contract

.evaluate effectiveness



During the first phase of the simulation, students are exposed to the different components that make up a particular cultural environment. The discussions and presentations that take place are most effective in making students aware of basic differences in cultures. This phase is critical in developing an understanding of the components that must be considered when the students are asked to market a product cross-culturally.

Phase two of the simulation is designed to move from understanding and awareness into actual practice and implementation. We often find that students can be "aware" of cultural differences and still not be sensitive to these differences in their own communication behavior. By forming cultures, developing products and determining a market strategy, students are forced to apply

the components previously discussed. During this stage, skills in brainstorming, problem-solving and decision-making are utilized.

The negotiations are a very exciting part of the simulation. Through the use of role-playing, students must actually demonstrate and practice the appropriate skills. In other words, to get their contracts signed by members of a culture, students must show a sensitivity to the norms and expectations of that particular culture. Both written and oral messages are utilized in communicating between cultures.

The evaluations phase is critical in processing the effectiveness with which various cultural groups were able to market their products. Feedback usually focuses on the particular sensitivity shown regarding specific cultural components as well as the skill demonstrated in their actual negotiations.

As Exhibit 2 suggests, the simulation begins by developing cultural awareness. This is done by providing students with information describing the components essential to understanding any cultural environment. Such understanding is critical in the development of cultural sensitivity. However, as the simulation progresses, students are asked to translate this information into workable communication strategies. This is where skill in cultural sensitivity is developed.

Discussion

The student reactions to the simulation have been excellent. Students seem to feel that the process of actually having to apply the knowledge learned is essential in developing a real sensitivity to cultural differences. As one student said, "I feel that by interacting with other cultures (through simulation), I was able to get a more realistic idea of how difficult the barriers are. It seems that every culture has its own inherent qualities which show through when a business venture is being dealt with."

The applications of such an approach to persons conducting business abroad are apparent. The simulation can be adapted and designed to focus on a particular culture of interest to a company. Also, the time frame can be adjusted so that it can be adapted to a shorter block of time. This would be particularly appealing to corporations interested in training people quickly and efficiently. Corporations might also find the simulation helpful in "assessing" potential candidates for assignments abroad. The simulation could be particularly effective in helping management "sort out" potential international business persons.

The biggest advantage of the simulation is its applied nature. Business persons will find the learning process created by the simulation very relevant to international business situations. We are aware that such an approach is still only a simulation. Even though we can create a setting designed to learn the skills of cultural sensitivity, we cannot recreate the culture. We highly recommend that the simulation be complemented with programs designed to increase language proficiency as well as give business persons opportunities to "live" in the culture before conducting business.

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